UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1996/NGO/2
28 June 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1996
New York, 24 June-26 July 1996
Agenda item 6 (a)

ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS: REPORTS OF SUBSIDIARY BODIES, CONFERENCES AND RELATED QUESTIONS

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Statement submitted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, Category I

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, dated 1 June 1996, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 23 and 24 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

* * *

1. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 1/ carries out a permanent programme on sustainable development. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), this programme has aimed at bringing about parliamentary action to implement Agenda 21 and report on such initiatives. On the occasion of the Ninety-fifth Inter-Parliamentary Conference (Istanbul, 15-20 April 1996), the IPU governing bodies reviewed progress and (a) adopted a political statement on financing and the transfer of technology, (b) formulated a proposal that national parliaments henceforth be considered major groups and (c) prepared a programme of work for IPU to contribute to the overall review and appraisal of Agenda 21 that the United Nations will carry out in 1997.

The follow-up to Rio: financing and transfer of technology

2. One of UNCED's essential achievements was its demonstration that the interdependence of nations was stronger than North/South confrontation. Economic growth, social development and the elimination of poverty in developing

countries were essential goals not only for developing countries themselves but for the achievement of sustainable development worldwide. It was agreed that the provision to developing countries of effective means, inter alia, financial resources and technology, without which it will be difficult to implement their commitments, will serve the common interests of developed and developing countries and of humankind in general, including future generations.

3. IPU has actively associated itself with the UNCED process. It considers that the provision of adequate financing and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies are essential components for the achievement of sustainable development. Accordingly, it has on many occasions encouraged its member parliaments to press their Governments to respect their commitments and to support their action to this end. Nevertheless, the UNCED follow-up evaluations carried out by the IPU Committee for Sustainable Development have clearly shown that difficulties in solving questions relating to financing and transfer of technology have gravely hindered efforts to implement the programme mapped out in Rio.

4. Rather than improving, this situation has for a number of reasons deteriorated in recent years. IPU deplores this state of affairs, which could well call into question the world partnership for sustainable development and threaten the survival of humankind over the long run. It recognizes that in the light of the worsening world economic situation, it is becoming more and more difficult for the Governments of North and South alike to keep their commitments, which impose heavy sacrifices on them in the immediate future and whose benefits will only be felt over the long term, on a planetary scale. However, mindful that the cost of inaction far outweighs the cost of applying the carefully thought-out decisions taken at UNCED, the IPU Council (its plenary decision-making body) issued a solemn declaration on the occasion of its recent meeting in Istanbul (April 1996). The declaration:

(a) Calls once again on the Governments of the developed countries to respect the commitments that they undertook by adopting Agenda 21, including those relating to granting the developing countries new and additional foreseeable financial resources, increasing official development assistance to 0.7 per cent of GNP and transferring ecotechnologies on favourable terms;

(b) Welcomes the pragmatic approach adopted recently by the Commission on Sustainable Development, which consists of putting figures to needs on a sector-by-sector basis, and strongly urges the Commission to continue its work along these lines;

(c) Stresses the need to supplement and reinforce international financial flows by improving the efficiency of aid and by mobilizing national resources in both developed and developing countries, particularly through economic instruments and policy reforms as well as by the creation of national environmental funds;

(d) Deems it necessary to cut subsidies that reduce economic efficiency and cause environmental degradation, while offsetting such cuts by direct income support to the most vulnerable groups;

(e) Stresses the fact that the Governments of developed and developing countries themselves have a joint responsibility to take measures to encourage foreign private investment in developing countries that is capable of contributing to sustainable development and guaranteeing the stability of private capital flows;

(f) Reaffirms that further progress is essential if an effective, sustainable and development-centred solution is to be found to the problem of the indebtedness of the developing countries, in particular the poorest and the most indebted ones. In this connection, it encourages the introduction of innovative mechanisms, such as debt-for-nature swaps or debt-for-social-development swaps;

(g) Urges international financial institutions and development agencies to redouble their efforts to integrate the economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable development in their institutional strategies and priorities;

(h) Stresses, as far as the transfer of technologies is concerned, that they should be demand-centred, environmentally sound and tailored to meet the needs of their potential users, in the light of the social, economic and cultural situation and priorities of the country concerned;

(i) Calls on Governments to set minimum environmental standards for technology transfer and cooperation in this field, to integrate ecotechnologies in technical assistance programmes and to take concrete steps to encourage partnership agreements between suppliers of technologies and potential users. They should in particular strengthen cooperation between government bodies, the private sector and scientific and technical institutions at the national level;

(j) Recalls that the private sector plays an essential role in technology transfer and that it is up to Governments to create conditions conducive to such transfer. To this end, it urges the Governments of the developed countries to use in particular financial and tax incentives to encourage private enterprises to promote and accelerate the transfer of ecotechnologies in the developing countries; it further calls on the developing countries to establish a transparent and reliable legal framework and to make the necessary efforts to acquire, assess, adapt and utilize ecotechnologies. Furthermore, these countries should strive to make more use of local technologies that are likely to foster sustainable development;

(k) Finally, urges the parliaments and parliamentarians of the world, as guardians of the public interest, to take full advantage of the mechanisms and means of action at their disposal to maintain, in their countries, the essential political will to apply these decisions.

5. By adopting this Declaration, the IPU Council called on decision makers throughout the world to seize the occasion of the 1997 general assessment to launch the spirit of Rio anew and to guarantee that the vast hopes created by UNCED are not disappointed.

Parliament as a major group

6. Agenda 21 declares that one of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making. It also affirms that the commitment and genuine involvement of all social groups is critical to the effective implementation of the objectives, policies and mechanisms agreed to by Governments in all programme areas of Agenda 21.

7. In every State, the national Parliament is the very embodiment of civil society. It is a key institution in the organization and functioning of the State. Its fundamental role is to represent and express the will of the people at State level. The Parliament, made up of men and women who are elected by the citizens at large and are in direct contact with the population and associations of their constituencies, is the most natural and legitimate institutions to represent the common interest of the various components of civil society.

8. The national Parliament plays a crucial role as the vehicle that provides the legislative framework for sustainable development activities. This is done through the ratification of relevant international conventions and agreements, the adoption of implementing legislation, the enactment of new laws (general or "framework" laws as well as enabling legislation in specific fields), and the adoption and harmonization of existing laws. As part of this legislative function, the Parliament also adopts the national budget and thus appropriates the State's budgetary resources and determines, for example, the financial allocations that will be given to sustainable development activities.

9. Each nation's Parliament also exercises executive oversight. Through parliamentary debates, it participates in the setting of State policy and it monitors the overall activities of Government, including in the field of sustainable development. This is done through a variety of parliamentary mechanisms (written and oral questions to ministers, special commissions of enquiry, for example) but also in its control of governmental public expenditure.

10. Action by the Parliament and its members is crucial not only for the implementation of policies and programmes of sustainable development but also for relaying and explaining to the public the issues involved and therefore also in forging popular support for such action. Members of Parliament engage in a direct and continuous dialogue with their constituents, which serves to build awareness among the general public of sustainable development issues. Moreover, the Parliament provides institutional and direct popular participation in the parliamentary decision-making process through hearings and parliamentary inquiries.

11. In order to strengthen the action carried out by IPU over the last several years to provide a parliamentary dimension to the follow-up to UNCED and for the reasons given above, the Union's governing bodies pursuant to the decision it took on 20 April 1996 requests that national parliaments be added to the category of major groups in the sense of this term as used in Agenda 21. For its part, IPU will be pleased to continue and strengthen its support to promote and report on parliamentary action to implement Agenda 21. Moreover, it

considers that this would be a further manifestation of the closer cooperation between the United Nations and IPU that the United Nations General Assembly calls for in its resolution 50/15 of 15 November 1995.

IPU contribution to the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 that the United Nations will carry out in 1997

12. At its session in Istanbul in April 1996, the IPU Council also decided to extend its full support and contribute to the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 that the United Nations will undertake in 1997 and that will culminate in a special session of the General Assembly. In that context, IPU will prepare and submit an overall review of parliamentary action to implement Agenda 21. This study will build upon the two inquiries already carried out by the IPU Committee for Sustainable Development in 1994 and 1995, and will use information obtained through a new survey of all national parliaments and, in particular, parliamentary committees dealing with environment and sustainable development issues.

13. There is a growing international consensus of the need to focus on unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and to develop national policies and strategies to encourage changes in such patterns. For this reason, IPU decided to organize a debate and prepare a statement on changing consumption and production patterns in the early part of 1997.

14. The issue of financial resources and mechanisms, particularly commitments undertaken by industrialized countries in this respect and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, is likely to remain a major concern in regard to the implementation of Agenda 21. The Union has therefore also decided to submit a further political statement on financing and technology transfer.

15. In 1994, the IPU published the first worldwide Directory of Parliamentary Bodies for Environment. This publication has been greatly appreciated and has proved its worth, both to facilitate contacts and as an educational tool, and an updated edition will be published in 1997.

16. Finally, the IPU governing Council called upon all national parliaments to devote one plenary sitting to consider progress in implementing Agenda 21. This should also provide an opportunity for national parliaments to contribute to the overall review and assessment that their respective Governments will undertake in preparation for next year's special session of the General Assembly.

Notes

1/ The national parliaments of 133 countries are represented in IPU, which also has three associate members, as follows. Members: Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Congo, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire,

Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Djibouti, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Gabon, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Latvia, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Mexico, Monaco, Mongolia, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, San Marino, Senegal, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Viet Nam, Yemen, Yugoslavia, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe; associate members: Andean Parliament, Latin American Parliament, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.